

## Hiring Practices: How Far Should You Go to be Fair?

It is always interesting, and challenging, to read the Human Side of Engineering. The piece entitled "Can You be Forced to Hire a Non-White Supervisor?" (PE, 11/7/91, p 53) was intriguing, in that the answer given by Mr. Fine purports to be free from bias. But, in reality, employment and promotion decisions are seldom, if ever, free from cultural biases and distortions.

According to Fine, Mr. Jones was selected instead of Mr. Wong, who is of Asian origin, because Mr. Jones' experience and background were more specific to the work requirements than that of Mr. Wong. This, of course, is a judgement call that often embodies the manager's cultural prejudices to the point of excluding individuals that are racially different.

Even when both applicants have the same qualifications, managers often select the applicant that they perceive to be more likeable. The "likeability factor" has been, and will continue to be, an important determinant in the hiring and promotion process, even when qualifications and capabilities are dissimilar. Inferior, less qualified resources with a high likeability factor, as determined by the manager, are often given high preference.

Straightaway, one can see that the resources not possessing "likeable" attributes will seldom be given opportunities for increased responsibilities even when qualified and capable. Therefore, the fact that racial differences exclude many minorities from hiring consideration ought not be dismissed. This exclusion in the hiring/promotion process is based on historical prejudices and is known as the "glass ceiling." — *Byron A. Ellis, Jr., Philadelphia, PA*

Mr. Ellis makes some insightful points in his response to the hiring of a white over a non-white candidate. Although Mr. Wong survived to be among the last 2 of 30 applicants, judgemental hiring decisions in this reader's view, are "seldom, if ever, free from cultural biases and distortions." Seldom, if ever? I don't know. I'd be inclined to delete the "if ever."

Mr. Ellis alludes to the "likeability factor" in employment decisions. He refers to "historical prejudices" known as the "glass ceiling." No argument there. But the question arises in this Human Side of Engineering column: How far must a conscientious, fair-minded manager stretch to prove he is human, and not prejudiced?

Granted, we all have our prejudices which we sometimes might not even admit to ourselves. But concerning the case in question, the fact that 28 applicants were eliminated, leaving only Mr. Wong and his white opponent, appears to strongly suggest Plant Engineer Vincent Fine's honest effort to be fair and objective. Did he have a hidden bias that caused him to lean in favor of the white applicant? The only one who could conceivably answer this question is Mr. Fine himself — and perhaps not even he. — *Raymond Dreyfack*

### Human Side Of Engineering

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"Mr. Wood, would you care to throw your helmet into the ring?"

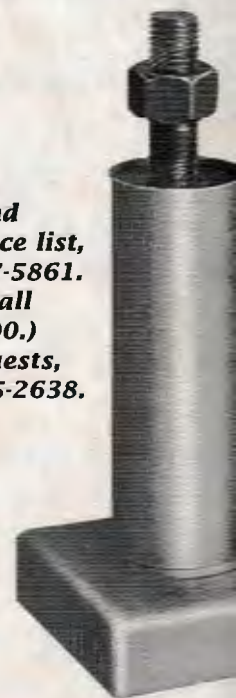
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